OAKLAND TRIBUNE (CA)
17 January 1984

# A question of intelligence: tracking American spies

*By James Rosen*

Item: Four years ago Jimmy Carter assured anxious American allies that the Shah of Iran's position was secure on the eve of the revolution that toppled him from power.

Item: At a dramatic United Nations session last September, American representatives played a fuzzy recording of ground-to-air communications with the Soviet pilot who shot down the Korean jetliner. The recording proved conclusively, they claimed, that the strike was a cold-blooded attack on an innocent victim. A Japanese tape of exchanges with the Korean pilot that would be made public the following week, according to promises, still has not been released. In the meantime, as the incident fades from memory, discordant views have emerged from the American "intelligence community": perhaps the Soviet pilot didn't know he was firing at a civilian plane; the Korean pilot might not have responded to warning signals after all.

Item: The Israeli pullback within Lebanon in October was based partly on American assurances that the Syrians would soon follow suit. The Syrian troops, 50,000 in number, have not budged. The CIA recently disclosed that with the PLO pullout from Lebanon in 1982, a valuable information network disappeared. "It was a major intelligence loss for us," one senior intelligence figure said.

Item: President Reagan responded to growing concern last fall about the Marines in Beirut by guaranteeing that every precaution had been taken to insure their safety. In October a "suicide" attack on their compound by Islamic terrorists killed 241 Marines. Now Reagan has accepted responsibility for the attack, stating, "If there is to be blame, it properly rests here in this office and with this president." His statement was prompted by a Pentagon report on the bombing that sharply criticized the entire military chain of command.

Item: When reporters asked administration officials why 6,000 American troops were required to subdue 600 Cubans in the Grenadian invasion, they answered that the "Cuban presence" on the island was stronger than expected. Military planners, they added, did not realize that Cuban construction workers there constituted an armed paramilitary force. The discovery of a cache of hidden ammunition was depicted by the administration as a revelation unequaled since the resurrection.

Aside from illustrating the unpredictable nature of world affairs, these disparate events raise disturbing questions about American intelligence capabilities.

Certainly intelligence shortcomings are nothing new. In 1961 John F. Kennedy's reluctance to implement the Bay of Pigs plan was mitigated by intelligence assessments which proved disastrously inaccurate. As the United States became ensnared in Vietnam later in the decade, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon blamed military failure on false reports from the field.

It should also be noted, in all fairness, that public image is an inherently risky proposition for any intelligence apparatus. While its mistakes frequently are bared by tragic consequences, the details of its successes usually must remain secret. When, for instance, the FBI revealed recently that it had foiled an alleged terrorist plot to bomb a Seattle location, the agency could not disclose specific information for fear of exposing its methods to future assailants. Had an explosion resulting in loss of life occurred, the agency would have faced long months of national outrage.

Despite such considerations, however, it is still fair to ask why our intelligence operations seem to miss the mark so often. Recall, for a moment, the attempt in 1980 to rescue the 52 hostages in Iran. After that ill-fated mission, a ranking Israeli defense minister was perplexed by both the conception of the plan and preparations for its execution. Given the same amount of time, Israeli agents, he claimed, would have infiltrated the neighborhood surrounding the American embassy. They would have purchased or rented numerous houses in the district. A whole network of underground tunnels connecting those homes with the embassy would have been dug. Every movement within the compound would have been monitored. With proper planning, he concluded, a strike force could have just about walked into the embassy.

Or take the more recent Grenadian affair. Although the invasion may have earned Reagan points in the opinion polls, it was not a military triumph. Considering the preponderant American advantage, what should have been little more than a mop-up exercise became instead a fairly protracted battle. The invading soldiers clearly were not prepared for the resistance they met. One administration official described the operation as an "intelligence failure."

The increased visibility of the United States in the international arena only adds to the burdens on its espionage activities. Some burdens are endemic: the need to gather information about real or imagined adversaries, requiring surreptitious means, will never mesh perfectly with a democratic society.

As tensions mount between the two superpowers, a second, more subtle, contradiction develops. President Reagan's antagonistic posture toward the Soviet Union casts an almost schizophrenic shadow over American intelligence agencies, portraying them alternately as omniscient and uninformed. A notion such as the "window of vulnerability," on one hand, assumes a rather precise knowledge of Russian nuclear strength. The administration's insistence on the difficulty of verifying an arms agreement, on the other hand, suggests that the Soviets can outfox us at will. These thoughts lead to an obvious question: If we can know that the Soviet Union has more bombs than us, why can we not also know that it has the same amount of bombs?

The CIA's budget has increased about 15 percent annually since 1980, an even faster rate than that of the Pentagon. During the same period, its total number of covert campaigns around the world, accoridng to estimates, has risen from 10 to 15, ranging from aid to anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan to the arming of anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua.

CONTINUED

2.

In the wake of such prosperity, who can say why the performance of American spies seems so uneven? Perhaps they're spread too thin. Perhaps they're too busy extending American influence to have time for trivial matters like gathering information. Or maybe the obsessions of a particularly single-minded president have slanted the way they see things. This last explanation would be unfortunate indeed, for — as any corporate manager will attest — what the boss wants to hear and what is actually happening are often worlds apart.

*James Rosen is a freelance writer living in Oakland.*